Are We Hated Enough?
John 15:18-6:5
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In 1967 the United Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. adopted a Book of Confessions. Rather than one theological statement or creed, it is a collection of statements from different points in history, all the way from the fourth century Nicene Creed to the Confession of 1967, a document written for our own age. History is important in understanding the nine components of the Book of Confessions. Social, political and economic forces surrounding the church at any given point in time have always determined what the church felt needed to be said.

There are a total of nine entries in the Book of Confessions, and number eight is a very interesting story all by itself. Shortly after the Nazis gained power in Germany, they consolidated their grip on the nation by taking over every established institution. Party men were put in charge of education, communications or propaganda, and of course, every normal governmental department; police, courts, the military and so on. Hitler knew that the success of his totalitarian ideal depended on every German institution being pressed into the service of Nazism, particularly those institutions which saw themselves guided by something greater than loyalty to the state. Two in particular, needed to be quickly subjugated - education and religion. So it was that German churchmen discovered in 1933, that the state had effectively taken over religion by establishing a state church, with men friendly to Nazism at its head. It was a very astute move: quite popular with a lot, if not the majority, of people. In fact, it was so adroitly disguised that to many people it looked like a very positive step.

There were, however, perceptive people who saw exactly what was happening. They gathered in the city of Barmen on May 29, 1934, and called themselves the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church. For three short days they discussed their dilemma; they wrote a brief document called

the Theological Declaration of Barmen and went home. Over the next fifteen years they were persecuted: Gestapo agents watched them very closely: they were imprisoned, tortured and executed. Among them was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged several days before the end of the war.

Listen to some of the things they said: anticipating the official response from the state controlled church they warned: "Be not deceived by loose talk, as if we meant to oppose the unity of the German nation! Do not listen to the seducers who pervert our intentions, as if we wanted to break up the unity of the German Evangelical Church . . . .

Try the spirits whether they are of God . . . If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture, then do not listen to us!"

The statement then lists the ways the "German Christians", meaning the Nazi Church leaders", were systematically undercutting the integrity of the church. The fifth article is the one that did it: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and above its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State."

And finally: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes and plans." [Art. 6]

The Theological Declaration of Barmen is undistinguished, theologically. But it stands as a contemporary witness to a very important New Testament truth. It stands as a monument to courageous Christians who would not compromise their convictions even in the face of persecution and death.

The historic and biblical truth that informs the Declaration is simply

that the followers of Jesus Christ have in the past, and always will have in the future, a built-in problem living in the world. In simpler terms still, the followers of Jesus are called to play the game by a different set of rules from everybody else. And it is to be expected that misunderstanding and conflict and suffering will result.

Jesus, himself, called it living in the world but not of the world. It is the theme which emerges from the New Testament lesson this morning.

We thought, last week, about the matter of Friendship. In the 15th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is talking with his disciples on the night of the betrayal and arrest. New Testament scholars call this section the "Farewell Discourses". He told them he was the vine and they the branches. He commanded them to love each other, and made it clear that their ability to survive would depend on the degree to which they became a loving, accepting, forgiving and serving fellowship.

Then he turned his attention to what appropriately could be called "warnings". And here we take up our lesson for today. The flow of ideas is as follows: the world will hate you, just as it hated me. It will hate you because you belong to me: i.e. your ultimate allegience is to me and to no other man, institution or state. The world hates me because as the revelation of God's truth, justice and mercy, my very presence convicts the ways of men in the world. That is to say, I - and you - by our very being - reveal the nature and depth of the sin of man.

Men of good will and good intentions will hate you and the reason is ignorance. They do not know that your way is the way of God. But I promise you that you will not be alone. The Spirit of God himself will be on your side. He, the Spirit of God, will be an advocate for truth and justice: and the advocate will never stop pursuing the mind and spirit of man.

Nevertheless, you can expect to be hated. And the cruelest and most ironic part of all is that your greatest problem will be with religious men.

The day is coming when you will be "persona non grata" in your own Synagogue. And some men will so misunderstand what you are about that they will actually kill you out of their misguided religious fervor.

Up until then the disciples had not really experienced hostility and hatred. Jesus, the charismatic prophet, had been the natural lightening rod. People either loved or hated him. But very soon, they would come into focus. His followers would be in the same position he was in. That, by the way, is precisely what happened. They were, in fact, expelled from the Synagogues and stoned, flogged, imprisioned executed - for religious reasons.

What do you make of that? First, some observations. We are, obviously, in a different kind of historical situation. They were a tiny, tiny minority. We are a majority. They looked out on a world that was hostile to them. We look out on a world that is, generally speaking, friendly to us. They had in their possession a new idea, a new Gospel, news that was really news. We live in a civilization that has existed with that idea for two thousand years; a culture that is impossible to contemplate apart from the continuing in-put of Christian Faith.

Is it possible, therefore, to conclude that the words of Jesus are a bit out-of-date? That the world's hatred: the fundamental conflict between the Faith and the World: the whole business of living <u>in</u> but not <u>of</u> the world: was real for them but passe' for us? I think not. In fact, I think our situation is, in many ways, more difficult than theirs. The historic fact is that no amount of overt persecution ever hurt the church. On the contrary, the Church of Jesus Christ has been strongest whenever the going gets tough. And so, for us, the problem is very complex, and very subtle, and very seductive. The problem is, in my mind, that we are in danger of being loved to death. It is a problem that goes all the way back to the founding principles of our nation.

The founding fathers were deists: that is, they believed in God, but

they were not, by and large, interested in the particularities of Christian Faith. Thus they did a remarkable thing. They saw to it that the state would not officially sponsor a particular religion, but at the same time they arranged for the state to encourage religion in general, which in many ways is simply unofficial sponsorship. I think we need to be careful and very clear in our thinking here. The separation of Church and State, and the freedom of religion guaranteed in the First Amendment, are principles that are essential and good and worth dying for. But the attitude toward religion in general that is part of the American psyche makes it extremely difficult for the Church to be the Church. The founding fathers regarded the function of religion in terms of teaching morality and that is all. And that, I would suggest is precisely the role assigned to religion by the vast majority of Americans to this day.

Let us not be deceived by the phrase separation of Church and State. We are, in fact, supported by Tippecanoe County and the City of Lafayette in that we pay no taxes for the use of this property. We are, in fact, supported by the Federal government because the taxes we don't pay on the money we give to the church are paid, corporately, by all the people. Again, I'm not suggesting that this is bad - nor do I feel that we provide no services that are helpful and valuable to all of the people. I simply feel that we need to understand our situation, and more importantly, the attitudes that result from it.

Partially because we are in a favored position in our society, and partially because of this general desire built into our system, namely "In God we trust", "one nation under God", everybody can feel a certain religiosity quite apart from a particular religion. - Christianity by osmosis. It's interesting that twenty million more Americans claim they are Protestants than the total constituency of all the Protestant Churches. That is to say, if you're not a Catholic, Jew or Mosleum, you must be a Protestant - because everybody is

religious. Bringing it closer to home when people designate their religion when they are admitted to the hospital it is on the same basis. Not belonging anywhere, professing nothing in particular, is all the qualifications you need to be designated a Protestant. In America very few people hate the church - very few people hate religion.

What then, of those disturbing words of our Lord? It comes down finally, I believe, to the matter of ultimate loyalties. Jesus knew that the world - the established institutions of the world - are always inclined to demand that loyalty. He knew that individual men and women are always inclined to be ultimately loyal to their own needs, preferences, goals, prejudices - i.e. to themselves. There is the conflict. Christian Faith demands a kind of loyalty, or commitment, that transcends all of these, and at times may run head long into them. That's what happened in Germany: but it happens to us, less dramatically of course, in a hundred ways everyday.

Where is your ultimate loyalty? On what basis do you make your decisions, and style your life and set your goals and structure your relationships? I was in a discussion recently where the question of welfare came up. One individual came on very strongly with what I am learning to identify as the Litany of Central Indiana. "Im not for any give-aways. If they don't want to work - let 'em rot!" It was a church meeting and I asked what I considered a very appropriate question: "Where did you get that idea? Is there something in Christian experience, theology, the Bible, the life of Christ maybe, that dictates that position?" His answer - which was a kind of unanswer - was that we have to be practical and look out for people who are lazy. I could translate that to mean that he was, at that moment, speaking out of his loyalty to a certain political/economic ideology, and not out of his loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Or consider the whole problem of human relations. Is there really any question about the mind of Christ and the will of God when it comes to your attitude and behavior toward minority groups? I think not. I think, rather,

that a lot of us simply respond and behave out of loyalty to something else - our prejudices, for instance, rather than our Christian Faith.

Thus the conflict, and the power of Jesus' own prophecy. One man put it sharply: "Perhaps we ought to ask ourselves, 'are we hated enough?' To be hated is uncomfortable. But even that is better than to be blandly ignored and overlooked, contemptuously dismissed as a set of children playing their futile and childish games - doing no good of course, but not much harm, and so left to amuse themselves with their innocuous pastimes." [A. J. Gossip, IB vol. 8 p 726]

It is not easy thing to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and it never has been. The moment it gets too comfortable, we need to be careful. Those of us who are committed to trying to be faithful in the world have, I believe, three options: three alternative courses to choose from.

We can, first of all, solve the conflict by withdrawing from the world. The monks did that literally. And a lot of people try to do it today. Certain segments of the sub-culture are saying that the good life is out of reach in the framework of society and may be found only on a farm commune, or an urban ghetto living day to day in pursuit of drugs. Essentially the same position is taken by the very pious whose concept of the Christian life is to be undefiled by the things of the world. That can be a wall just as thick as any monastery. And to refute that option we need only observe that the disciples did not go throughout the ancient world establishing retreat centers, nor were they thrown to the lions for holding prayer meetings.

The second option is to work out a kind of compromise: to affirm one thing on Sunday and then live out of some other system the rest of the week. It's not too difficult to pull off: it simply requires that the Sunday affirmations not be taken too seriously. It is, obviously, a cop-out.

The third option is to give one's loyalty to Jesus Christ and then be faithful to that loyalty in the framework of whatever life you are living.

It is the difficult course. It is the option that creates conflict, and demands decision making, and runs the constant risk of misunderstanding and even hatred. But it is also the kind of life that will be blessed by the Spirit of God himself: the kind of life that will be sustained by a sense that what I am doing may be costly and difficult, but it is right - it is God's will.

That was Jesus' promise. In loyalty and commitment to him we have an advocate, the Spirit of God. We will not be alone. It is to this life that we are called.

Amen.

Our father, we confess that in the middle of our complex and hurried lives, it is not always easy to be faithful. Forgive us when we fail, when we make compromises of convenience. Strengthen our resolve and undergird us with the power of goodness and truth: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.